

In the bleak midwinter

by Blackcatn2

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Summary: Charlotte Hawthorne has worked for several years as the Shelby's no nonsense accountant. Before the outbreak of WW1 and many in Small Heath considered her practically wed to Tommy Shelby, even though he has barely looked at her since he returned home. A re telling of season one onwards with an OC will be slow burn.

1. Chapter 1

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,

Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;

Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,

In the bleak midwinter, long ago.

Part 1 - 1919

The slamming open of the door pulled Charlotte out of her work as she sighed, rubbing her eyes. She hears loud drunken voices, attempting to be quiet, as they stumble around next door. Thankful her task is almost complete, Charlotte finishes her final total column then puts her pen down, relief flooding through her at the thought of going home and falling into bed. Getting up she feels her back muscles protest at her movement after hours spent hunched over at the desk. The voices in the next room are still attempting to be quiet but failing in their drunk state, she could hear Arthur loudly boasting, while John was chatting away. Charlotte turns down the oil lamp extinguishing the flame as she picked up the account book.

Opening the office door Charlotte ensures she makes enough noise so as to not to alarm the men in the next room as she walks into the Shelby's front room.

'Lottie, come in have a drink.' Arthur greeted without turning around as he grabbed another glass and poured out a generous measure of

whiskey handing it to Charlotte.

'What you doing here still Lottie?' John asked holding out his own glass for a refill, Arthur filled his glass spilling whiskey on the floor in the process something which Charlotte knew the so far quiet Shelby brother was watching with interest.

Charlotte takes in the three Shelby brothers. Arthur and John both look several sheets to the wind, suits dishevelled from their time at the pub Tommy looks slightly more put together but Charlotte knows he will be far from sober. Taking the glass Arthur offered her Charlotte answers 'Getting the books ready for tomorrow. One of us has to do the work around here.' She sips the whiskey feeling the liquid burn down her throat.

'That's what we pay you for Lottie.' John retorted spilling some of his whiskey as he gestured with his glass to Charlotte.

'Lucky, then, that I do the books so I know I'm worth every penny that you pay me.' She retorts downing the rest of her drink. Turning to the thus far silent brother, Charlotte holds out the current account book which he takes, his piercing blue eyes watching her carefully. A lesser person would crack under the intensity of Thomas Shelby's analysing look but Charlotte Hawthorne at 27 has grown accustomed to this stare, her tiredness however forces her to break their stalemate first. 'I should be off if we have a long day ahead of us tomorrow.'

'I will walk you back.' Tommy says finally breaking his silence he places the book on the table in front of him not bothering to check her work. He stands up putting his own glass down grabbing his hat as Charlotte grabs her own coat and hat off the coat pegs.

'Don't stay up too late.' She calls to Arthur and John as they walk out the door, Charlotte vaguely hears the two other Shelby brothers grunt in response from the kitchen. Charlotte and Tommy walk in comfortable silence down Watery Lane towards Charlotte's home on Great Barr Street, the normally busy roads quiet at this hour.

Tommy doesn't look at Charlotte as they walk along, knowing he must have something on his mind Charlotte eventually prompts. 'You gonna tell me what your problem is with Arthur?'

Tommy ignores her comment, asking his own question instead. 'The books all in order?'

'You mean are you making money quicker than Arthur can drink it away, then yes the books are in order.' Charlotte hesitates on the last part of her sentence, something she knows Tommy will pick up on.

'But?' He asks finally looking at Charlotte.

'If you don't start making more money and current spending continues then you'll be broke in six months. Times are hard people dont wanna gamble at the moment.'

Tommy looks thoughtful before answering. 'Sounds like we need a stroke of luck.' Tommy took out his cigarette case taking one out.

'More than a stroke. I know you're planning something Arthur won't like.'

'What makes you say that?' He said placing the cigarette in his mouth.

'I know you Thomas Shelby.' Charlotte looks at him as she says this to see if he reacts, finding his face as impassive as ever, she looks away as he lights his cigarette. They walk in silence for another minute eventually arriving at Charlotte's door, before she can open the door Tommy grabs her arm gently turning Charlotte to face him.

With his free hand he removes his cigarette. 'What would you suggest then?'

'There's a girl in the Chinese quarter they call a witch she will give you your stroke of luck.'

'Arthur won't be happy if I go against orders' Charlotte notices Tommy watching her reading her reaction to his plan.

'I'm sure Arthur will be too drunk to realise.' She eventually answers. Tommy doesn't say anything taking another puff on his cigarette as Charlotte finally opens her door. 'Night Tommy, I'll see you in morning.'

'Sweet dreams Charlotte.'

Charlotte undresses quickly falling into a restless sleep with dreams of horses, magic and bewitching blue eyes.

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Charlotte woke up late the next morning her body protesting the lack of sleep after her late night balancing the books. Throwing her covers off Charlotte jumps out of bed splashing cold water on her face before dressing quickly in her second best dress and brushing her brunette locks putting them into her customary up do of a bun with its two ornate looking hair combs. In no time at all she was rushing back to 6 Watery Lane the smell of Sulphur from the iron works already thick in the air. Knocking on the door Finn the youngest Shelby opens it on her second knock greeting her as he does so. 'Lottie.'

Charlotte takes in Finn's smart suit thinking how he looks like a young Tommy or John that thought causes her a stab of pain and she decides to focus on the task at hand. 'Morning Finn, they up?'

From the kitchen she hears Polly call 'Is that Lottie? I got her toast ready.'

Walking into the kitchen Charlotte takes off her coat and hat greeting Polly the matriarch of the Shelby family as she does so.

'You shouldn't have stayed so late last night.' Polly says as she places a plate in front of her with two slices of toasted bread. Charlotte spreads both with jam and takes a bite out of a

slice.

Once she had finished chewing she answers 'Books are balanced though ready for today.'

'You should let them do it if they are so eager to cut us out.' Polly says still rushing around the kitchen preparing food for John's kids. A cup of tea is placed before Charlotte.

'It's ok, it's my job.'

Polly doesn't reply instead sitting down opposite Charlotte smoking while she drinks her own tea lost in thought about the day ahead flicking ash into the already full ashtray she says. 'Just remember it will only be your job until they find a man able to understand the numbers.'

'You getting all suffragette on me Poll?' Charlotte teases having another bite of her toast.

'I'm just worried is all. They come back and think they know what's what.'

'Luckily we are still around to steer them in the right direction then.' Charlotte hears footsteps and excited voices behind her and doesn't turn knowing its John and his brood of kids. 'You'd be lost without us wouldn't you John?' Charlotte doesn't complain as John steals her second slice of toast in their regular morning ritual.

'Yeah whose toast would I steal?'

Polly rolls her eyes at his antics jumping out of her chair and starting to serve up breakfast for the children who crowd around the table.

'Lot Lot.' Martha, John's youngest calls excitedly from her father's arms her small arms reaching for the woman sat at the table.

Charlotte holds out her arms taking Martha from John letting the toddler sit on her lap feeding her spoonfuls of the porridge Polly places in front of her. John remains standing while Finn, Jack and the twins Andrew and Joe eat their own porridge.

John finishes his stolen toast before pronouncing 'You're gonna be late for work Lottie.' He walks over to the double doors opening them onto the already busy betting shop. Charlotte follows him giving Polly an apologetic as she hands over Martha and picks up her tea cup before walking into the shop.

Several members of the gang were rushing around getting the shop ready. 'Two minutes boys.' Arthur says from the middle of the organised chaos checking his watch with one hand the other holding a bottle of whiskey.

Charlotte keeps her face impassive at Arthur drinking so early in the day and takes her seat in her office finding the book she balanced last night on her desk with a note from Tommy. _Will find the stroke of luck. _ Charlotte screws the note up and throws it in the bin

knowing Arthur will not be happy. She hears the doors to the betting shop open and the first few customers trickle in as she sits down and starts working finding peace in the numbers.

It was a couple of hours later while Charlotte is on the main floor checking a book with Scudboat that Jack runs into the shop followed by Finn. 'Dad your never guess what uncle Tommy did!' he called excitedly.

John who is stood with Arthur by the main blackboard talking seems disinterested in what Jack has to say, but John decides to humour his son when Jack repeats his question. 'What's that son?'

'He got a Chinese witch did the powder trick to bless the 'orse now everyone knows he is gonna be a winner.' Finn says before Jack gets to tell his farther the news. Jack pouts at Finn, while Charlotte quickly pretends to look engrossed in the book while her and Scudboat both wait for Arthur's reaction, they were not disappointed when they heard his roar of rage.

'What did you fucking say?!' The few customers who had been placing their bets in the shop quickly rush out not wanting to bear witness to Arthur's tantrum. 'WHAT DID YOU FUCKING SAY?!' Arthur repeats himself more loudly this time his anger directed at the two young blinders.

Charlotte says nothing as she watches John step forward placing a hand on his brother's arm stopping him. 'Leave them Arthur they are just the messengers.'

'FUCKING TOMMY, THINKS HE RUNS THIS FAMILY. THINKS HE CAN FIX RACES LIKE BILLY FUCKING KIMBER.'

John doesn't remove his hand from Arthurs arm trying to calm him down he says. 'Let's go get a drink in your office and when Tommy shows his face later you can yell at him yeah?'

Arthur looks at John for a moment swaying slightly from the whiskey he has already drank that morning. Everyone in the shop silently holds their breath waiting for Arthur to calm down or start smashing stuff up. 'Alright then.' Arthur says shoulders slumping slightly in defeat. She waits until John has ushered Arthur into his office and closed the door behind him before she lets out the breathe she was holding and escapes to her own office.

Charlotte is not surprised when a while later Arthur stumbles into her office the smell of whiskey wafting in with him as he slams the door behind him.

Hitting his fists on the table he growls 'What did he tell you?'

Charlotte looks up from her book meeting Arthurs gaze. 'I know as much as you Arthur.'

'Bullshit.' He shouts smashing his fists on the table again. Outside the office Charlotte can see several members of the peaky blinders looking into the office anxiously.

Charlotte raises an eyebrow at Arthur's behaviour hoping that no one

interrupts them and sets Arthur off on a rampage. She remains silent knowing Arthur needs to have his rant.

'I know he talks to you. WHAT DOES HE SAY?'

Scared of Arthur's actions Charlotte puts down her pen and stands up knowing she needs to choose her next words carefully to calm Arthur down.

'He doesn't tell me anything Arthur not since he got home, not sinceâ€¦'. Charlotte trails off that train of thought knowing Arthur will calm down with the implication of those words. 'I know what he is thinking just as much as you do.'

Just as she hoped Arthur softens at her words his anger quickly disappearing. 'Lottie, I.'

'Arthur the day I know what Tommy Shelby is thinking is the day I run off with the Lee's to tell fortunes.'

Arthur snorts at her suggestions 'I'm sorry Lottie.'

'It's ok Arthur. I'm gonna get back to work and so should you, it's a big day.'

Arthur walks out the office closing the door respectfully on his way out, Charlotte sits down glad in his drunken state he didn't realise how much he had scared her. She feels bad deceiving Arthur but it is clear to her in the numbers that Arthur is running the family business into the ground with his drinking and his temper. Let Tommy deal with his family's mess Charlotte thinks picking up her pen once more.

It was getting late when Charlotte sees Tommy walk into the shop he doesn't come into her office instead Charlotte gives him a warning glare as he walks past summoned into Arthur's office.

She attempts to finish her work as she hears Arthur shouting at Tommy and then Tommy walking back out of the shop while Arthur yells after him that there will be a family meeting later.

The office goes quiet again and Charlotte is packing up when she feels someone watching her. John lounges in the door way chewing on a cocktail stick which is his method of giving up smoking, his arms crossed relaxed despite the day's drama. Charlotte smiles in greeting. 'Come to save me from work John?'

'Always Lottie. It's dinner time let me walk you back to Great Barr Street.'

From his tone and stare Charlotte realises that John must need to talk. 'I'm ready now if you are' She finished straitening a pile of paper work that she will deal with the next day before turning off her lamp once again and walking out the office.

The door to 6 Watery Lane has barely closed behind them when John asks what has obviously been on his mind all afternoon 'Do you know what's bothering Tommy?'

'If I had a pound for every time someone asked me that question I

wouldn't need to work anymore, I tell you that John.' Charlotte senses John's lack of satisfaction with her answer and so tries again. 'I don't know what's wrong with Tommy, you know he doesn't talk to me like that anymore not since the war.'

'But today with Arthur.'

'Tommy would never do anything to harm the family John, he only wants what is best for everyone.'

'I know that but...'

Charlotte interrupts him again. 'Tommy has always been good at reading situations and playing his cards when the time is right. I am sure he has a reason for talking to Arthur that way.' Feeling the need to lighten the mood Charlotte changes track. 'Now enough talk about that moody git, tell me about your new lady.'

'How did you know?' John asks surprised

'We went to school together John. Now we go to the same bath house.'

John stops walking forcing Charlotte to slow down and turn to look at him. 'Promise you won't tell anyone. Not Polly or Ada and especially Tommy.'

Sensing his distress Charlotte smiles encouragingly. 'You have my word John.'

John doesn't start walking again one hand playing with his watch while he refuses to meet Charlotte's eye. 'And you don't judge me? Don't think it's too soon?'

'You know I loved Martha, John she was a good friend like a sister to me. I am sure she would want you and the kids to be happy. As for what they might say, they forgot times were tough Lizzie did what many girls did, shit if things had been different I would have done the same John.' Charlotte is surprised when John hugs her close.

'Thanks Lottie' He whispers in her ear before quickly letting her go and walking on Charlotte follows him and they finish the remaining walk in silence with John donning his cap to her as he walks away to put the kids to bed.

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The next few days are uneventful for Charlotte as she works through balancing the books again after the influx of bets on Monaghan Boy. She sees little of Tommy which is probably for the best if Arthur is to believe she knows nothing about Tommy's 's the next Saturday Charlotte and Ada are walking back to Small Heath having gone window shopping in town while the football was on when they spot Tommy running out the Shelby house towards the Garrison.

'Where is the fire Tommy?' Ada calls after her brother.

'It's Arthur, the cops pinched him and messed him up bad.'

The two women wasted no time in running into the Shelby house finding Arthur sat on one of the hard-backed chairs face a mess while he groans in pain. John and Polly are fussing about as Ada and Charlotte both take off their coats, Ada quickly rushing to boil water on the open fire while Charlotte inspects his cuts.

'John, wipe the blood out of his eye.' Ada says ignoring Charlotte's inspection.

'Since when did you give orders?' Grumbles John.

Ada squeezes a cloth while answering. 'I'm a trained nurse.' Causing both Charlotte and Polly to role their eyes at each other.

From his chair Arthur groans 'Don't make me laugh, it hurts my face.'

'I bloody am.'

'You went to one first aid class in the church hall and got thrown out for giggling, Charlottes a trained nurse.' John points out.

'Perhaps I should take over then.' Charlotte says taking the cloth from Ada's hand and cleaning Arthur's cuts properly.

'Not before learning how to stop somebody from choking.' Ada replies not bothered that Charlotte had taken over.

'I'm not choking.'

'You will be when I wrap this cloth round your neck.'

The door swung open as Thomas entered carrying the rum, Ada, John and Polly watch as he quietly unscrews the lid grabs a cloth and soaks it in the rum. His battle field training kicking in as he stands next to Charlotte and applies the spirit to the worst of Arthur's wounds. Arthur hisses at the pain as Charlotte moves onto strapping his thumb with tape while Tommy watches on approvingly.

'He said Mr Churchill sent him to Birmingham. National interest, he said. He said there'd been a robbery.' Arthur takes a sip of the rum.

John and Ada miss the look Polly sharply glares at Thomas in response to Arthur's revelation. Thomas steps back, not reacting to Arthur's words or Polly's stare.

Finishing his sip Arthur continues 'He said he wants us to help him.'

'We don't help coppers.' John said the offensive evident in his tone.

Turning to Tommy Arthur says 'He knew all about our war records. He said we're patriots like him.'

Charlotte soaks another cloth and begins to clean Arthur's other wounds. 'He said he wants us to be his eyes and ears. I told him we'd have a family meeting and a vote.' Arthur stares at Tommy taking

another sip while his words sink in.

'Why not? We have no truck with communists. Or Fenians.' No one responds to Arthur as he continues to stare at Tommy. 'What the fuck is wrong with you? Lottie, Polly, what is wrong with him lately?'

Charlotte doesn't answer her expression turning sad while Polly peers at Thomas for a moment.

'If I knew, I'd buy the cure from Compton's Chemists.' Polly says hoping to lighten the mood.

Tommy turns and grabs his coat calling out. 'Arthur, you're broken up pretty bad.' As he pulls his coat on leaving.

Arthur growls trying to stand up as Charlotte turns to the stove keeping her hands busy as Polly calls out to Tommy.

John comes and stands next to Charlotte by the fire.

'No one blames you. He just needs time Lottie.'

Throwing the bloody cloth into the water Charlotte replies 'I know. I should get going.'

'Lottie love thanks for looking after me.' Arthur hisses drinking more rum.

'Tis not a problem Arthur. Can't let them ruin your pretty face now. ' Charlotte takes her coat from Polly who gives her a searching look Polly seems unsatisfied with what she sees as she hugs Charlotte close before letting her go.

Charlotte closes the door behind her to a chorus of goodnights from the assembled Shelby's taking a deep breathe she begins the walk home alone with her thoughts of another crazy week with the Shelby's.

2. Chapter 2

Thank you to all those people who reviewed and liked chapter one. It is nice knowing people are enjoying this story. Hopefully chapter three shouldn't be far behind this one as I broke the original chapter two up. A huge thanks goes to Shortie-M for beta reading this and offering the best suggestions.

Chapter 2

It was a Thursday afternoon and the betting shop was dead. Charlotte wasn't surprised that the shop was so quiet, Friday was pay day and when they did most of their business. The click of Polly's boots was the only thing to break the silence as Charlotte sat at her desk, head once again buried in an accounts book. Hearing Polly's boots go quiet Charlotte looked up.

"Did ya hear about the new bar maid at The Garrison?" Polly asked leaning against the door frame as she took a drag from her cigarette acting nonchalant despite the fact Charlotte knew Polly was probably

bursting to tell her something.

"Should I have?" Charlotte said putting her pen down, resting her left arm on the desk, as she began rubbing her temple. She knew Polly was trying to make a point but was too frustrated by her work to bite.

"They say she is pretty as a peach, much too fine to be pulling pints round here." Polly gestures around herself with her cigarette dropping some ash as she does so.

Charlotte stopped massaging her temple thinking about Polly's words. "What she doin here then?" Charlotte questioned, eyes narrowing on the older woman. During the war Charlotte had learnt to never trust a convenient happenstance and if the new bar maid really was so good looking she had to question what was the attraction of Small Heath and The Garrison when there are much better pubs elsewhere in the city.

Polly's eyes lit up as she watched Charlotte finally rise to her bait. "That's my thought exactly."

"You know what Poll. Suddenly I feel like a rather large gin, care to join?" Charlotte stood making no pretence of sorting anything on her desk, instead hurriedly grabbing her coat.

"Excellent idea. Ill grab my coat." Polly called already walking back into the kitchen of the main house.

The two women walked arm in arm up Watery Lane to The Garrison several men tapping their caps in respect as they passed. Outside the pub they found Lilly and Sally in their usual spot hoping to tempt men as they left the pub. "Afternoon girls." Polly greeted the two prostitutes.

Charlotte had always liked Lily and Sally, the two women had done odd jobs for Polly and the peaky blinders during the war, but with peace and the men home they were both back on the game. "How's business going?" Charlotte asked knowing not all men had come back as gentle as they had left.

"It's starting to pick up, Lottie. Thanks for the money for the kids clothes, I'll pay ya back soon, I promise." Lilly stammered nervously as she stood up straight from her casual lean against the pub wall.

Charlotte put her right hand up resting it on the other woman's arms hoping to calm her down. "Nonsense you don't need ta pay us back Lilly. We all look after each other."

Polly took out her cigarette case offering one to each of the women, they both took one and Polly then offered her lighter to them after lighting her own. "Know anything about the new bar maid?" Polly asked once Lilly had taken a puff visibly calming.

"Names Grace. She works hard but asks a lot of questions," Sally supplied. All four women shared a look. Asking questions was never a good sign in Small Heath, adding to that Polly's earlier comment about her good looks and Charlotte took felt a sense of distrust towards the new bar maid.

"Says she worked in a pub in Dublin but that's a load of shit. My Michael is from them parts still has family there, says he has never 'eard of it before." Lilly added.

Charlotte took a second to process this information before saying, "You ladies pick up anything else interesting let us know."

"Make sure its us though, keep this as women's business." Polly added.

"Probably for the best." Sally agreed.

Polly gave each woman a few pennies for their troubles.

Walking through the double doors of The Garrison they found the pub much like the betting shop, quiet. The two women walked over to the bar where Grace stood cleaning a beer glass, a pile of clean glasses on her left and wet glasses on her right. If she knew who they were she didn't show it. Charlotte took a moment to take in the other woman. She was slim like Charlotte, her skin clear but her hair was shoulder length and blonde while Charlotte's reached half way down her back and was brunette.

"What can I get you two ladies?" Grace asked putting the pint glass and the cloth down. Her accent threw Charlotte slightly not expecting a single Irish woman to find much cause to live in Small Heath.

"Bring a bottle of gin and three glasses over." Polly instructed as she put some coins on the counter which would more than cover the cost of the bottle. They then both sat down at a table on the other side of the bar where they could watch Grace prepare their drinks.

As Charlotte watched Grace move about behind the bar Polly continued to puff on her cigarette before asking. "I don't suppose you know where our Ada is running off to?"

"Now you know that even if I did know who she was seeing, which I don't, as woman should have some secrets."

"Some secrets?" Polly questioned smiling at the younger woman.

They paused their conversation as Grace walks over with a bottle of gin and three glasses. "Here you go."

"Ta." Charlotte said taking the bottle and pouring gin into each of the three glasses.

Before Grace could walk away Polly gestured with her cigarette at an empty seat. "Take a seat. Grace is it?"

"I shouldn't I'm working." Grace protested, looking around for someone to help her. The few people in the pub looked the other way while Polly smirked triumphantly.

"Now I don't think any man in here will dare say anything to you having a quick break."

"Here have a drink with us. I'm Charlotte and this is Polly," Charlotte introduced handing Grace a glass while she reluctantly sat down.

After Grace had taken a sip, wincing slightly at the gin Charlotte asked, "Tell us about yourself Grace."

"Not much to tell really I'm from Ireland and I am here now." Charlotte noted Grace's knuckles turning white from her grip on the glass as she took another sip.

Polly took a mouthful of her own drink before enquiring. "What exactly is it you are doing here Grace?"

"Working."

Wanting to antagonise the barmaid into giving a more detailed answer Charlotte asked "Are you a whore?"

"Are you?" Grace quipped turning to Charlotte.

She laughed at the barmaid's response saying "I don't think any of these clowns could afford either of us." As she rose her glass and gestured to herself and Polly.

"What about Tommy Shelby?" Grace asked obviously trying to rattle Charlotte as she took another drink not wincing at the gin this time.

Charlotte lent back in her chair watching Grace wondering what the bar maid was hiding while Polly looked between the two women with interest. "What about him?" She answered finally.

"I hear you both work for him." Grace countered gaining confidence.

"Now you make us sound like whores." Polly said before Charlotte could answer.

Placing her glass on the table Grace seemed to sense she had overstepped a mark. "I didn't mean no disrespect."

"Perhaps not," Charlotte said filling up Grace's and her own glasses again. "Where did you work before you arrived in Small Heath?"

"I worked in a pub in Dublin." Grace picked up her glass again taking a larger mouthful of gin.

"You didn't mind the troubles?" Polly probed.

Charlotte notices Grace flinch at this statement taking another large sip of gin. "I minded them enough to keep out of them."

"What made you decide to move to Small Heath then?" Polly carried on probing.

Charlotte took a large gulp of her own drink as Grace did the same before answering Polly. "I heard its somewhere people can get lost."

Charlotte knocked back her whole glass of gin before she said.
"You're not wrong there. People do get lost here especially if you're not careful."

Grace obviously mindful of Charlotte's threat answered. "I should get back to work."

"You should, we've taken up enough of your time," Polly said dismissing the girl with a wave of her hand.

Grace stood up and downed the rest of her drink before asking, "Did I pass your test then?"

Polly looked at Charlotte eyebrow raised at the boldness of the barmaid. "Test?" Charlotte questioned.

"That's what this was wasn't it?" Grace's appeared to lose her initial boldness under Polly and Charlotte's searching stares.

"I wouldn't call it a test. More that round here us women have to stick together." Charlotte states smiling at the bar maid in a way that would be described anything but friendly.

"Harry will want to know why I was sat talking." Grace uttered walking briskly away from the other woman.

The two women sat there for a moment watching the bar maid disappear into the back room. Polly poured herself another gin, downing it in one mouthful before standing up. "We should go."

"Okay I need to finish some work anyway," Charlotte agreed, following Polly out the door. Harry who had obviously been watching the whole exchange nodded to them as they left. Charlotte inclined her head to show Harry they weren't displeased at the exchange with his new bar maid.

"I don't like her," Charlotte said as they walked out the pub.

"Neither do I," Polly agreed.

"She's hiding something."

Polly mmmmed in agreement as they made their way back to Watery Lane.

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Friday evening found Charlotte sat finalising the books after pay day, her head was spinning from hours of looking at numbers. She was therefore less than impressed when Tommy waltzed into her office without a word of greeting. She glanced up from the accounts book and watched him deposit himself in the chair opposite her desk, unfolding the evening dispatch as he did so. Charlotte carried on working in silence knowing Tommy was waiting for her to talk, this being their Friday routine since he came back from France. She let him wait making a show of finishing the total on one page and moving onto the next before casually breaking the silence. "Grace is pretty."

Tommy ignored her comment pretending to read the paper. Charlotte

rolled her eyes at his behaviour and had turned her attention back to the accounts book when Tommy announced, "I need to kill Danny Whizz-Bang."

Caught off guard she exclaimed, "What the fuck Tommy?"

Satisfied that his news had managed to ruffle her he repeated. "I need to kill Danny Whizz-Bang." Tommy folded his paper placing it on Charlotte's desk.

"Is there a reason why?" She enquired her face and voice betraying her shock, as she subconsciously began to play with her pen.

Tommy took his cigarette case out, procuring a cigarette from within, he tapped it three times on the front of the case before stating, "Besides the madness?"

"He is a man Tommy, not a horse, you can't just put him down for being mad. What has he done?" Charlotte snapped as Tommy lit his cigarette, she glared at him demanding an answer as he took a drag.

"He killed one of the Italians." He replied finally exhaling smoke.

"Shit." She uttered, realising she had been toying with her pen while they had been speaking she placed it on the desk.

"They have agreed not to start a turf war, if I get rid of him."

"Does Arthur know?" Tommy raised an eyebrow at her question. "Right. But you're not actually going to kill Danny, are you Tommy?"

"The Italians want blood."

Charlotte began nervously playing with the pen again, thinking. "I was thinking the other day we could do with a man in London, to pass on the chatter from the pubs like." She mused out loud.

Tommy considered her plan, flicking ash from his cigarette into the ash tray Charlotte kept on her desk for him, while he thought. "I could get Charlie to ferry him down." He answered, seemingly agreeing with her suggestion.

Charlotte nodded her head in agreement, then paused awkwardly saying. "We can't keep this from Arthur though."

"Of course, Arthur is head of the family." Charlotte narrowed her eyes suspicious by how quickly Tommy had agreed to the last part of their plan.

Tommy kept his face blank as he took another drag of his cigarette. She felt him watch her nervously play with the pen on her desk, as she considered how best to approach her next topic. "What about those guns you think I don't know about?"

He didn't immediately answer watching her carefully as he took another puff of his cigarette before stubbing out the end.

"Polly?"

"My own intuition, guns go missing from the BSA that new copper shows up and pinches Arthur, pretty bar maid prances into town. It all connected." As she said each point she counted it on her left hand, feeling more confident having explained her theory.

Tommy ignored her argument barking, "The guns are not your concern," his tone warning.

Charlotte felt instantly annoyed at his tone and lack of response to her speculation about the new bar maid. "I am your accountant, if there is a profit to be made, they are."

"We can't sell them." He answered quickly, clearly annoyed with her suggestion.

Charlotte looked Tommy in the eye as she replied, "Obviously, but not all profit is made in cash."

Tommy considered her words. "We could use them as leverage." He agreed.

"Where are you going to stash them in the meantime? They can't stay at Charlie's yard forever." She pointed out as she leaned back in her chair, attempting to get comfortable.

"Danny whizz bang will need a grave to make it look convincing."

"A grieving widow will help misdirect people." She mused aloud, mind racing with numbers and possibilities as she considered who they would need to pay off to help. "You'll need to get your hands dirty or find two men you trust to help you shift them."

"No." Tommy said shaking his head, before continuing. "We keep this quiet, the less people know the location the better."

"What are you thinking?" she enquired as she rested her arm on the back of the chair.

"You got your hands messy before." Tommy responded face blank as always.

Charlotte knew there was no point in arguing that Tommy should use someone stronger to help him move the guns. His mind obviously made up. Sighing she asked, "When we doing this?"

"Full moon wanes tomorrow we can move them from Charlie's yard then." Tommy watched her carefully before adding. "You know I trust you."

"Do you?"

Tommy gifted her with one of his now rare smiles saying, "Always." As she returned his smile, Tommy picked up the evening dispatch again, opening the paper near the back where the horse racing information was.

Sensing the subject was closed Charlotte picked up her pen intending to go back to work when she realised Tommy had distracted her from her original thought. She made a show of beginning her work again

before saying. "Are you going to carry on pretending that half of Small Heath are not talking about you and Grace."

Tommy looked over the top of his paper as he asked. "Back to the bar maid again?"

"Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about then." She snapped annoyed and hurt by his obvious refusal to acknowledge his interest in the bar maid.

Tommy shrugged his shoulders trying to appear unconcerned with her words. "People talk a lot. It's harmless enough." His gaze met Charlotte's, cold blue eyes meeting softer blue over the top of the newspaper. "Lottieâ€|I" He began.

Charlotte saw a look of tenderness pass over Tommy's face, fearful of what he might say next she interrupted him retorting. "If that's how you wanna play it Tommy be careful. As she is lying about working in Dublin." Before pointing a finger at him warningly. "And she is much to pretty to **just** walk into The Garrison"

Tommy jumped out of the chair folding the paper and shoving it under his arm as he moved towards the door. He turned before stepping out of the room saying, "Jealousy was never attractive on you Charlotte."

Taking a deep breath to calm herself knowing Tommy was baiting her she called after him as he left her office. "So I am supposed to be jealous then, Tommy?"

3. Chapter 3

The second part of chapter two and I feel like we are getting somewhere. Huge thanks once again go to Shortie-M for helping to beta read this.

Chapter 3

It was on a cold moonless night that Charlotte and Tommy had put their plan into action, shifting heavy boxes into the newly dug grave of Danny Whizz-Bang. Apart from their late night rendezvous another week passed uneventfully for the citizens of Small Heath. John had asked Charlotte if she would look after his kids while the brothers went to the fair and she had happily agreed. Which is why early the next Saturday Charlotte found herself let into John's house.

"You need anything, Polly said she would give you a hand," John said, as he played with the rim of his hat checking the razor blade hidden there.

"It's not a problem John," Charlotte replied, taking her coat off and placing her basket of groceries down on the floor.

"Thanks for this Lottie."

"Tis alright John, now get going you don't wanna be late and piss off Tommy."

"I suppose not. Would be a long drive otherwise." John chuckled as he

opened the door.

"Have fun, John."

"You too, Lottie." John said with a wink as he closed the door behind him.

Charlotte sighed wondering if she had done the right thing agreeing to look after John's children who had only got wilder as they grew older. She boiled a kettle for tea then sat and made herself comfortable reading while waiting for said children to wake. It wasn't much later the sound of Martha's crying had Charlotte going upstairs, finding the youngest Shelby had wet herself.

Martha was happily splashing in the tub downstairs, when the boys awoke a half hour later.

"Dad gone?" Andrew asked.

"He has Andy. He will be back later though."

"What's for breakfast?" Joe questioned sniffing the air slightly in excitement.

"Let's see what I put on the stove shall we." Charlotte made a show of checking the food on the stove. "Looks like porridge and Bacon."

"Bacon." Jack exclaimed excitedly.

"Don't tell Aunt Poll, she'll say I'm spoiling you." She said moving around John's small kitchen locating cutlery from a draw which she passed to Jack, before finding plates in a cupboard.

"We won't, we promise," Jack said as he helped Charlotte set the table as the twins eagerly agreed, both nodding their heads as they took their chairs.

Charlotte picked Martha up out the tub drying the toddler and dressing her while the boys ate.

A commotion in the street had the boys up out their chairs and staring out the windows curious. Charlotte walked over to peer out as well as Martha playing with her neck a chief as she did so. Seeing people rushing about Charlotte turned to the eldest boy saying. "Jack go find out what happening. Joe, Andrew finish your breakfast now." The twins dutifully sat at the table eating while they all listened to the shouting from outside. Charlotte took Jack's vacated chair, drinking another cup of tea while she bounced Martha on her lap.

A few minutes later Jack ran back into the house catching his breath he said, "Lottie, they're smashing up 'ouses on Great Barr Street."

Charlotte leapt out of her chair, worried about her own house. "Who are smashing up houses, Jack?" she asked the young boy.

"Coppers."

"Fuck. Come on boys you need to go find Aunt Poll while I check my house."

"Ok, Lottie," Joe called as the twins quickly put their shoes on and run out the door with Jack while Charlotte followed after them, having thrown on her coat and hat. Holding Martha she didn't bother to lock the door knowing John never bothered and no one would think to steal from a Shelby. Not that he has much. Charlotte quickly dismisses that thought and heads in the opposite direction of the three boys, heading instead to Great Barr Street.

Running around the corner that joined Watery Lane and Great Barr Street Charlotte saw chaos as children ran half dressed in the streets, as people's belongings were thrown out of windows. There was a swarm of coppers rounding people up while many residents stood around, watching in the street, unable to do anything. Charlotte spotted one of her neighbours Mrs Moore who was sat leaning on the worn bricks of her house a child on each knee, staring at the contents of her living room that was littered the street. "What happening Mrs Moore?" Charlotte puffed, catching her breath from running up Watery Lane carrying Martha, who was getting deceptively heavy.

"It's the fucking coppers, Lottie, looking for communists. Apparently the peaky blinders said they could search while they're at the fair."

Sensing the other woman's frustration Charlotte attempted to defend the peaky blinders. "Ya know that's a crock of shit."

"Perhaps but they aren't smashing up the garrison. You should check your house though." Mrs Moore nodded her head down the street and, Charlotte followed her gaze seeing several officers outside her house going through her belongings, Charlotte felt a rush of anger. She nodded her thanks to Mrs Moore before running briskly down the street, Martha thinking it's a game happily chatters away in her arms. Arriving at her house Charlotte winces finding two coppers going through her clothes on the road. Both men were tall and well built. Here for trouble, Charlotte thought.

"What do you think you are doing?!" Charlotte demanded of the two officers.

Not bothering to look up from his search one of the officers answered, "Looking for communist sympathisers by order of the inspector." His Irish accent giving him away as one of the new recruits from Belfast that Polly and Arthur had both warned Charlotte about.

"I doubt you will find them in my knickers, now leave my stuff be. I got nothing to hide," she snapped pointing at the two men.

The other copper stroked his moustache, as he stood up looking at Charlotte saying, "Orders are orders, Miss."

A third copper with a full beard walked out of Charlotte's front door holding a small locked wooden chest. "Looks like we might have found something, Gents." he announced, his accent thicker than the first ones.

Charlotte's eyes widened and her heart rate increased at the sight of the box in the man's arms. "Leave that, its private," She uttered trying to sound calm as Martha began fussing in her arms, picking up on her distress.

"Thought you said you haven't got nothing to hide?" The first copper asked, giving her a sinister smile that she'd seen on many a man before.

She glared at him her blues eyes shining with deviancy, showing she wasn't scared. "It's obviously nothing to do with communists."

"Open it and I'll be the judge of that," the third copper said unaffected by Charlotte's plea.

The second officer walked over to the third and inspected the box. "We can always break it open."

"NO!" Charlotte cried out stepping closer to the officers, her anger further upset Martha who began loudly crying.

"No?" the third officer mocked.

"Open it up, Love or I'm sure we could poke around in your knickers some more." The second copper leered at Charlotte, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

"I'll never fuck a pig," Charlotte snapped, her anger causing her to blurt out the first thing that came into her mind.

"Well, we don't fuck whores," The first copper growled his accent thick, as Charlotte felt the sting from the back of his hand as it connected with her face. The pain caused her eyes to begin to well with tears, she quickly pushed the need to cry aside, thankful she managed to remain standing, as Martha begun screaming hysterically in her arms. A memory stirred in her mind she quickly dismisses that thought, instead focusing on the task at hand.

"Don't think there isn't more where that comes from. Now open the box Whore." the third copper ordered, shoving the box in Charlotte's face.

She was saved from further confrontation as footsteps running down the street distracted the officers. "What's all this?" Polly asked, as she ran over John's boys and Nipper with her. Two of the coppers backed off but the third holding the box stood his ground.

"Stay out of this Miss," he barked at Polly.

"Miss? Come now, boys, I'm sure we can reach some sort of agreement."

The first copper, feeling braver now he had moved out of immediate punching range queried in his thick accent, "What kind of agreement?"

"Tell you what I give you a pound, you leave the box and walk away."

"Pound each." The second copper bargained twiddling his moustache in

glee. Polly opened her purse and gave each man a pound, the third dropped the box on the floor and Charlotte winched as it crashed to the ground, luckily not opening. The three men quickly walked away, not bothering to look behind them. Charlotte felt Polly take Martha from her arms, allowing her to pick up the wooden box cradling it close to her chest like she had with Martha in her arms.

"Come on Lottie, Let's go to Watery Lane. I'll send someone to clean up later. Boys." She commanded, Jack, Andrew and Joe followed silently, Joe running to hold Charlotte's hand which she squeezed reassuringly.

Charlotte placed the wooden box in the middle of the dining table running her fingers across its polished surface. She stopped her toying as Polly handed her a wet cloth, for the small cut the police officer had given her when he had back handed her.

"You must think I'm pathetic."

"No. I think you are one of the strongest women I know." Polly was walking around in the kitchen mixing ingredients together. "Don't go feeling sorry for yourself. Now drink this." She placed a glass in front of Charlotte who put the damp cloth down.

Glaring at the glass Charlotte asked, "What is it?"

"Never mind that." Polly waited till Charlotte had downed the glass grimacing at the bitter taste before she spoke again. "I think you did what any other woman would have done in the same situation and everyone would have seen that copper strike an innocent woman who was just trying to have some dignity."

She smiled weakly at the other woman winching at the pain that caused. "Thanks Poll."

"Now let's get you to bed."

"Bit early for that, Poll." She commented, raising an eyebrow confused.

"Perhaps but I want you in bed before you pass out."

"Pass out, Polly?!" she cried in shock as she looked between the older woman and the empty glass.

"You have barely been sleeping, Charlotte. Its time you got some rest."

"Polly where am I gonnaâ€¦|" Charlotte started to protest.

"You know your way around upstairs. Ill check on you in five you better be in that bed."

Realising she was fighting a losing battle Charlotte grabbed the wooden box and made her way upstairs. She wasn't sure which bed Polly had meant so she headed to Tommy's room the familiarity of it comforting her as she took off her shoes. She began to feel drowsier and gave up on taking off the rest of her clothes choosing instead to let her hair down as she fell backwards onto the pillows, breathing in the scent of Tommy off the sheets.

When Polly came up five minutes later she found Charlotte fast asleep on the bed snoring deeply.

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Her dream was troubled a mismatch of memories. A baby kept crying. One of the twins she remembered, Martha had been rocking him as Charlotte stood, staring numbly at the fire in the grate of six Watery Lane. It was Christmas time, they hadn't bothered with a tree that year. 1916 her mind supplied, in the bleak midwinter. She vaguely heard someone saying something, but it wasn't until she felt a hand on her arm and Polly stood in front of her taking her tea cup out of her hand that Charlotte was able to focus on the occupants of the room realising she was lost in her own thoughts again.

"Lottie, love, let's get you up to bed."

"I'm okay, Polly."

"Come on, love, I'll give you a hand."

She does not remember walking up the stairs, every night the same. _The tea will help you sleep,_ he had said. She's aware of Polly talking again. "I know it's not fair to ask this of you, Lottie, but I need you to lock these feelings away, just until the men get back. I need you Lottie. The business is falling apart and I'm not sure where to start with the books."

"What about Martha?" she asked, the voice not sounding like her own.

"You know Martha can't read, Lottie, also she has her hands full with all those kids. I need your help, Charlotte, I wouldn't ask if I wasn't desperate. I don't know who I can trust." Polly had sounded desperate. _But she never begs,_ she thought.

Charlotte doesn't remember if she answered Polly, but she remembers the pleading look the other woman had given her as she closed the door. The baby was crying again downstairs, he never stopped screaming. Eat, sleep, and repeat in the bleak midwinter. The external wounds heal, the internal still feel fresh.

It wasn't until a few weeks later she saw Harriet Cartwright slap Polly in the street that she really bothered to look at the other woman properly, both her and Martha look as tired as Charlotte.

"The business is falling part. I need you to lock these feelings away, just until the men get back."

The box had cost more than she would have liked, but it was sturdy and had a small key. All the letters, pictures, clothes where placed inside and locked away. She remembered walking into the shop that night claiming the corner office and opening one of the account books.

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A scrapping noise outside the room woke Charlotte up. She lay looking up at the ceiling for a moment, not being able to shake the memories

off. Sitting up she turned and saw Tommy as he attempted to quietly close the door behind him.

"Tommy." She winced, speaking causing her split lip to throb.

Tommy walked back into the room as he realised he had woke her up. "Who did this?" he asked crossing the room in one stride, he sat on the bed his hand out and ready to cup Charlotte's face before he remembered himself and awkwardly dropped his hand to the bed.

"Who do you think? Some fucking pig. I should get going." " She moved to get out of the bed but Tommy's warm hand on her arm stopped her. "I'm sorry I'm in your bed I should go sort my stuff andâ€¦" Charlotte stopped babbling as she felt Tommy give in to his temptation, his hand cupping her face and tilting her head up so she was looking him in the eye.

"You've never apologised before for waking up in my bed," he said softly like he was talking to one of his horses.

"Things where simpler then," she softly replied turning her face away from his, unable to look him in the eye any longer.

Tommy didn't speak for a moment. Curious, Charlotte peaked a glance at him and saw his gaze was resting on the wooden box. He must have sensed she was looking at him as he said, "They were. Things can be simpler again."

"Can they?" Feeling how close Tommy had moved, she looked up at him again meeting his gaze as Tommy lent his head forward instead of answering. Her tummy fluttered in anticipation, her hand finding his on the bed sheet as she closed her eyes.

"Tommy, Tommy," Finn called as he ran through the door. Charlotte quickly removed her hand from Tommy's.

"WHAT?" Tommy snapped, as he turned and glared at his younger brother. She winced at the harshness of his tone but also felt frustrated at the interruption.

Finn took in the scene on the bed realising he had interrupted something. "Sorry Tommy, Charlie wanted to know what you wanted doing with the horse."

"I'll come along and help stable him. Run along and let Charlie know."

Finn quickly rushed out the room while Charlotte looked down at the blanket, her fingers tracing the rough material.

She could feel Tommy staring at her and refused to meet his gaze until she felt his fingers softly touching her face again. "I've got to go. I will come find you later though." Tommy smiled at her as he left the room making her heart flutter in a way it hadn't done so in a long time.

"Alright," she replied, remaining seated in Tommy's bed and left wondering what had just happened.

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Charlotte was helping Polly feed John's kids when Arthur stomped into the house. He looked at Charlotte's split lip, tutting slightly. "Wear it like a badge of honour, love, and if you ever see that copper again let me know and I'll show him what he gets for touching a peaky blinder woman."

She smiled at the eldest Shelby. "Ta, Arthur."

"Good lass, now Tommy says he needs the two of you outside in the next 'alf hour."

"Why? What's going on?" Polly asked

"We're 'aving a bonfire. Bring the picture of the King as well." Arthur nodded at the picture in question before turning and walking out the kitchen.

"Arthur, what does that bloody mean?" Polly called after the eldest Shelby as he marched back out of the house, slamming the front door behind him.

"Bloody men, wish they would let me know what was happening sometimes."

"Things where simpler when we were in charge," Charlotte agreed, having heard Polly's rant many times since the boys had returned from France.

"Yeah and now look at us." Polly sat down smoking her cigarette watching Andrew eat his mash. "What did Tommy say earlier?"

"How do you know he said anything?"

"Cause despite being back handed by a copper you still have a face like Christmas and he left this house with a spring in his step."

Charlotte looked at the assembled children aware they might repeat what they hear to John or heaven forbid Tommy.

"Jack, Finn take Joe and Andrew outside."

Finn and Jack dutifully got down from the table each taking one of the twin's hands and leading them outside.

Charlotte didn't speak even after she heard the door close.

"Well?" Polly prompted.

Charlotte thought carefully about her words, feeding Martha a spoonful of mash before turning to Polly. "He was more like his old self."

Polly got up grabbing a bottle of whiskey and pouring too glasses pushing one towards Charlotte she asked, "Is that what you want?"

"I dunno Poll. Things feel so complicated. I'd rather there had never been a bloody war then the old Tommy never would have gone."

"I know, Love but we can change what has happened."

"I know, which is why I give him his time and space" More quietly she adds "And he gives me mine."

"Just make sure he doesn't have too much time and space. That bar maid looks like she is doing her hardest to turn his head."

Charlotte scoffed at Polly's suggestion. "You think I should worry?"

"I think you let him off too easy he will never know what he is missing. Now come on we should go see what stupidity they have got themselves into now."

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Charlotte stood, staring at the flames hypnotised by the way they rose high up into the air, angry reds and oranges against the black night. She held Martha in her arms while Harry from The Garrison handed out pints and people stood around chatting about the drama of the day.

"Put them on boys," Tommy said his tone happy as he threw another picture onto the fire and the crowd cheered.

"I 'ope you know what you are doing," Arthur grumbled from beside his brother.

John threw the pictures he had managed to collect onto the fire before taking his beer from Finn.

From behind them Charlotte heard someone say "Come on folks give us a bit o room." Charlotte aside making space for the newcomer.

"You Mr Shelby?" A well-dressed man in his mid fifties asked stepping through the crowd. He looked scared shitless as he looked at the assembled residents of Small Heath.

"I am." Tommy then took a drag of his cigarette not bothering to turn and look at the reporter.

"You said I would be protected?" The reporter asked nervously.

Tommy flicked ash into the fire. "You are protected," he answered.

The reporter took out his notebook and pen. "What's going on?" he questioned.

"There are some things I want you to write down. Now first of all, it's not that people round 'ere are disloyal to the king, it's the opposite you see. We don't want our beloved king looking down and seeing the things that are being done to us, so we are taking down his pictures." Tommy took another drag on his cigarette.

Before Tommy could continue the reporter interrupted. "But why are you burning them?"

"We went through hell for our king, walked through the flames of war." Tommy turned to the reporter and realised he wasn't writing anything and gestured to his notebook. "Write all this down. And now we're being attacked in our own homes. These new coppers over from Belfast, breaking into our homes and interfering with our women." Charlotte saw Tommy pause as he looked at her. "We don't think our king would want to see that happening, so we are lighting fires to raise the alarm."

"May I ask you in what capacity do you speak?"

"No capacity. I'm an ordinary man, I won gallantry medals at the Somme and I want you to write in your paper what's going on here." Tommy takes another puff of his cigarette. "Go on go." He gestures with his cigarette behind him and the reporter dismissed, quickly rushed off.

Charlotte stood watching the flames content as Tommy moved to stand next to her on one side and John stood on the other. She heard a few people whisper about the cut on her face but they were quickly silenced by a glare from one of the blinders. When Charlotte felt Martha began to softly doze in her arms she turned to John and said, "I'll take the kids home John, and put them to bed if you like."

"Thanks, Lottie. I won't be long now." John replied still holding a mostly full beer in his hands.

As she turned to find the twins and Jack, Charlotte caught Tommy's gaze he smiled fondly at her as she shyly returned his smile, remembering their conversation a few hours ago on his bed.

She quickly gathered John's boys and set off towards his house at the end of Watery Lane. An hour later John found Charlotte sitting in front of the hearth, warmed by the glowing embers dozing off herself.

"All asleep John," she said, stretching as she got up out of the warm chair.

"I can't thank you enough Lottie."

"It's alright."

"Want me to walk you home?"

"It's alright. I figure I've had enough excitement for one day."

"Don't be daft now. I'll never be forgiven if I let you walk alone in the dark and something happens." John held out her coat, helping Charlotte into it.

"You think too highly of me John."

"I'm serious, lord knows what Arthur, Ada, Polly or Tommy would say. We can't function without you." He held out his arm like a fancy gentleman making Charlotte laugh as she accepted his arm.

"You only say that because I'm the best at maths."

"You've found us out, Lottie," he teased.

They arrived back at Charlotte's house and she was glad to see all her belongings were off the street like Polly had promised.

"I'll see you in morning John."

"Night, Lottie."

Walking into her rooms, she despaired slightly at the chaos of her belongings being everywhere. Whoever had tidied up had attempted some semblance of order, but everything still felt chaotic. The wooden chest sat on her small table and Charlotte took the key off from around her neck opening the box for the first time since he came back. Tears filled her eyes as she stared down at the contents of the box. Charlotte quickly snapped the lid shut and locked it once more, deciding it was too late to deal with that mess.

End
file.